

His Little Red Hen

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soon over when she refused to partake. But who wants to rush to bed at 1 o'clock? We separated into groups and chatted quietly.

"I'm going down stairs to hunt for mail," scowled Lessing, glooming terribly at Jack and Helen, who were sitting by Henrie's cot. "Come with me, Helen, won't you, and we can take a stroll?"

"No, thank you," answered Helen, with sweet indifference. "Bring my mail, if there is any."

Fenton Lessing played a little scene all by himself. He threw a look of reproach at the heartless fair one, cast a meaning glance at the bell, as if to hint that if she wanted a menial she could ring for one, then appealed to heaven for help, comprehension and the gift of patience and departed sulkily upon his errand.

"Helen," said Jack. He spoke low, to her alone, and his voice was troubled.

"Yes?" The brief word was a whole volume. Shorn of the indifference of a moment ago, her tone was warm with life.

"We are old friends."

For a while that was all; she looking at him meanwhile with a keen intuition of what was coming. Presently he continued:

"Better still, we are good friends. May I say something?"

Laughter and jest were humming around them; their sorrow set them apart.

"Will the saying help, Jack?" she asked, and there was warning in her words.

He honestly pondered her question.

"Yes," he said finally, but with evident depression, "I think it may."

"Say what you like, then," she permitted, depressed, too.

"It's—It's Fenton Lessing. He's a nice chap, Helen. He comes of a good family, and—well, the boy's all right."

That seemed to be all, absolutely all. Germaine was entirely finished. With his eyes fixed sadly upon the woman who understood him he quietly patted the sleeping child who lay between them.

They were silent, but it cannot be said that they did not speak, for every thought which his heart held leaped into her eyes and answered him there.

Whatever it was, they fought the fight through to its end and the mastery was hers, and he was glad, for he quietly lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"And I shall never marry Fenton, or any one," she concluded, as if to some masterly array of argument.

Reacting out to the table he picked up one of Geneva's pictures. "Any court would free me in an hour," he said quietly, almost dispassionately, but the cords leaped into view in his clenched hand. He struck the radiant, pictured prettiness and threw it from him.

His glance traveled back to Henrie, resting there devotionally.

"But Geneva shall never say that I shut her from what was once, and still is, her home; nor kept her from the little child who loves her, Geneva knows, and always must know, that it is possible for her to come back to me—for Henrie's sake, for Henrie's sake, for Henrie's sake!"

"Don't say that before the baby," begged Helen, "or to me."

Again the pause fell.

"Helen, what good can come of it," said Germaine, "your wasting your life for this? There were no words for him to finish."

"None," she said, dearly smiling. "But I shall do it to the end."

"No letters," said Fenton, reappearing as sulkily as he had gone.

We were all saying good night.

"And if you want any help, Jack," said Essie earnestly, "never scruple to call me, at any hour."

"Want help?" echoed Jack blankly. Then his eyes stole anxiously to Henrie. He went white. "Why, you don't think—" and he put his hand to his throat to strangle the words there.

"Henrie is all right," said Helen quickly. "Let her sleep."

He looked mightily lonely as we shut the door upon him.

How nice and normal the daylight is to be sure; next day things were back to the usual. And next night the play went finely. The house just shouted at Germaine's scene in the last act. He did play it exceptionally well, exerting every effort of his mind and heart to bring a smile to the face of his audience, which to him was an audience of only one—tired little Henrie propped disconsolately in the wings, waiting for the tributary roar of laughter. It cheered her like wine.

"But what in the world ails my Little Red Hen that she sinks back so quickly?" asked Germaine, worried to death, as he bundled the baby into her wraps after the performance. She lay as inert as a doll.

"She's just spinning away for a woman," blurted Chapman Childs. "Girl children are lots like that. They need a mother's arms around 'em to keep 'em alive."

Wednesday night Henrie was not strong enough even to sit in a chair, so a sofa was fixed for her in the wings.

Again Germaine rolled through his part, again he put his best work in his last scene, and again his reward was less the tumultuous applause of the audience than the glimmer of light that lit up Henrie's face—a little bit of a face, no bigger than a penny kite.

One line in particular had been made Henrie's own, for Jack used to fling it at her in comradeship. "If you love me, look at me!" It was a "catch" line, clinching an absurdly funny courtship scene with Essie Airy. The stage was set for a moonlight garden, just off a ballroom, bits of waltz music playing softly all the time. The line, simple as it was, invariably "brought down the house," so full was it of ludicrously ardent exultation. During its delivery, Germaine would smile at Henrie, she smiling back, the rippled mirth of the audience a pleasure to them both.

A pleasure while Henrie was well, that is, but very little pleasure now, for as the week dragged to its close it was more than plain that the child was in a seriously bad way.

Sunday night her father couldn't even dress her, but put a blanket around her little white wrapper and tucked her on the sofa in his dressing room while he made up. Her sleep wasn't sleep exactly, but a sort of stupor, so that she was oblivious of what was going on. Essie never thought of lowering her voice.

She hurried in with Helen and came right out with the thing.

"Jack," she said, "Geneva's company is in town. They evidently don't play Sunday night. I thought you ought to know, I passed Geneva in the street not a minute since."

"Speak lower!" ordered Jack, furious. "Geneva!" cried Henrie, pushing away the blanket and struggling to get up. "Jack, did you hear that? Geneva in our town—at last! My mother! My pretty Geneva! Is she here? Will she come? Jack, talk to me! Will my mother be here soon?"

The fire in her eyes wrung truth from him.

"Henrie, I don't think so," he said, slowly, hoarsely. "I don't think she will."

The child dropped back as if shot, and Helen ran to her and knelt by her.

"Henrie!" she cried, frightened. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes; you can go away," whispered Henrie hoarsely.

Perforce, Helen went.

Quickly making up and dressing, Jack sat beside his baby and watched the havoc of change which deepened on her face. Her breathing was all wrong. That small, uncertain heart of hers had got the shock the doctor was always warning against. Something must be done to set it right.

Germaine rose blindly to his feet and scrawled out a telegram. Going to his door, he chanced upon Fenton Lessing and wrung his hand as if he had not seen him for weeks.

"You'll send this, won't you?" he asked. "To Geneva."

Lessing glanced down at the message: "Come to the theater immediately. Henrie is dangerously ill!"

"Sure, old chap," said Lessing. Then, pityingly, "Don't worry, Jack; please don't."

Going back to the sofa, Germaine said with impressive distinctness:

"Little Red Hen, listen: I've changed my mind. I think Geneva will come."

Henrie opened her eyes and seemed to come back from somewhere; she spoke coherently but passionately:

"You always tell me the truth, don't you, Jack?"

"Always."

"And you really think she may come?"

"I really think she may come."

"Carry me to the wings, Jack. It will be your cue pretty soon."

Lovingly he carried her to her accustomed place. He comprehended that she dare not speak of the hope which gathered strength from his promise, but the life of it was tingling happily through her.

Then commenced his torture, for the play was on. Every minute that he could he stood beside Henrie, trying to reply assuringly to the constant question:

"Jack, is Geneva here yet?"

"Not yet, Little Red Hen."

Finally Henrie sickened of the asking and dropped into a heavy stupor.

Just as Jack tore himself away to go on for his last act, Lessing brought a telegram:

"Your ruse is too flimsy, Jack. Invent something else. Geneva."

Crushing the paper in his fist, Jack went upon the stage and plunged into the gaiety of the scene, carrying his audience cheerily with him.

And Henrie never moved—her pet scene, too.

To her quiet form Jack played as he had never played before, all the great house rose at him in applause.

Yet still she never stirred.

Then he came to the test line, the line of their freemasonry. Into his voice there leaped a loud fear—it rang commandingly:

"If you love me, look at me! look at me!"

"Henrie!" And again: "Henrie!"

Unable to continue, he paused—the silence intense, except for the music.

Dazed and obeying the command of his spirit, Henrie sat up and slipped from the couch. Swaying and faltering, she went right out before the footlights; not that she saw them; blind, indeed, and drawn but by the homing instinct, she staggered across the center of the stage till she came to her father's stricken feet. Then she raised her hands. And he lifted her to his breast.

From the audience came a stir of expectant amusement. The music swelled a little louder. To raise her feeble voice above these noises, Henrie spoke very clearly:

"Jack," she said, and her voice "carried" to the galleries. "Is Geneva here?"

"No, dear."

As if the words had been a stab she blanched beneath them. Across the stage, Essie Airy sank into a chair and turned away her face.

"Jack," continued Henrie, still clearly, "is Geneva coming?"

Before the trusting honesty of her big bright eyes of brown his lie was silenced.

"No!" he said at last.

Into her glance there came a quick gleam of reproach that he should hurt her so. Her wee wasted hand crept slowly to her heart, clutching at its burden of pain. The music kept on and a little laugh wafted up from the audience. Then Henrie's head, framed in its red-gold curls, dropped heavily back upon Jack's arm.

At that some one behind the scenes, with awful intuition, gave an order. And the final curtain made its slow descent.

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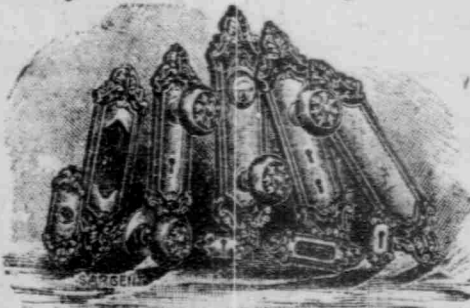
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